The Universal and Local Aspects of the Church

Christ's Own Definition *of* the Church

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Introduction

Few words in the New Testament have been used more loosely—and misunderstood more widely—than the word *church*. For many Christians today, the term immediately calls to mind a building, a denomination, a congregation, or an organization. Yet when we turn to the New Testament itself, we quickly discover that none of those ideas define the church as Christ and the apostles presented it.

This writing is an attempt to return to the New Testament record and allow the Scriptures to define the church on their own terms. It does not seek to criticize Christian sincerity, promote a movement, or recover a historical model for its own sake. Its purpose is much simpler: to observe how the church is introduced by Christ, formed in history, and described by the apostles.

The New Testament presents the church with two inseparable aspects. On the one hand, the church is universal. It is one Body, one new man, one dwelling place of God in the Spirit, composed of all believers everywhere. On the other hand, that same church is always expressed locally. It appears in identifiable places, among real believers, in actual cities. The New Testament never treats these two aspects as competing ideas. They belong together.

Confusion arises when one aspect is emphasized at the expense of the other. When the universal aspect is emphasized without locality, the church becomes abstract and detached from daily life. When locality is emphasized without the universal reality, the church becomes fragmented and divided. The New Testament avoids both errors by holding the two together.

This study begins where the New Testament begins. It starts with the Gospel of Matthew, where the Lord Jesus Christ speaks for the first time about the church and defines it by His own authority. It then follows the historical formation of the church in the book of Acts, where Christ continues His work as the Spirit. Finally, it considers Paul's letters, where the meaning of the church is unveiled without altering its practical expression.

Throughout the study, one principle governs the reading: Scripture interprets Scripture. Later writings do not override earlier ones, and historical developments outside the New Testament are not used to redefine what the apostles taught. The question is not how the church developed over time, but how the church is presented in the inspired record.

The goal, therefore, is clarity rather than novelty. If the New Testament presents one universal church expressed in local churches, then that testimony deserves to be seen plainly. If Christ Himself defined the church, then His definition must remain decisive. Anything beyond that belongs to history, not to the foundation.

What follows is a careful walk through the New Testament's own witness—allowing Christ to define His church, the Spirit to form it, and the Scriptures to explain it.

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I. Matthew — The King and His Assembly

Matthew and the Kingdom of the Heavens

Matthew presents the King and the kingdom of the heavens. It governs the relationship of the King to His subjects and the relationship of those subjects to one another under His authority. Authority, obedience, and accountability permeate the book from beginning to end. The Gospel of Matthew is not primarily a narrative of personal spirituality, but a revelation of divine rule exercised through the King and expressed among His people.

The King's Authority and the Word Church

When the word *church* appears in Matthew, it appears exclusively within this kingdom context. The King Himself speaks. He does not describe an existing institution, nor does He borrow language from religious custom. He announces what He Himself will build and govern. His words establish authority, define responsibility, and set the boundaries of accountability. No later interpretation may override or redefine what the King Himself declares.

Ekklesia Defined by the King

The Greek word translated *church* is ekklesia. It means an assembly—a gathered company called out to meet before God. **It never refers to a physical structure**. **It always refers to people assembled**. **Thus, the church, according to Christ, is the assembly of God, not a building, not a place, and not an institution.**

More importantly, Christ defines ekklesia by how He uses it, not merely by what the word means. In Matthew 16:18, He says, "I will build My church." The ekklesia is therefore something Christ Himself builds, owns, and brings into being. It does not arise from human initiative, organization, or agreement. It originates in the will and work of the King.

In Matthew 18:17, Christ says, "Tell it to the church." Here the ekklesia is presented as a corporate assembly that can hear, judge, and act under His authority. It is distinct from an individual believer and distinct from two or three gathered in fellowship. The church is the final earthly authority established by the King for matters of accountability among His subjects.

Taken together, Christ's own words define the church as a corporate assembly of His subjects, gathered under His authority, built by Him, and accountable to Him within the realm of His kingdom. This definition is complete within Matthew itself. Later revelation will unfold its life, formation, and meaning, but nothing will alter what the King has already defined.

II. The First Occurrence of Ekklesia — Universal in Revelation

Scripture Reading: Matthew 16:13–20

> 13 When Jesus came into the region of Caesarea Philippi, He asked His
> disciples, saying, "Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?" 14 So they
> said, "Some say John the Baptist, some Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of
> the prophets." 15 He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" 16 **Simon**
> **Peter answered and said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."**
> 17 Jesus answered and said to him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for
> flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in
> heaven." 18 And I also say to you that you are Peter, **and on this rock I will**
> **build My church**, **and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it**. 19
> And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you
> bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will

be loosed in heaven." [20] Then He commanded His disciples that they should tell no one that He was Jesus the Christ.

This is the first occurrence of ekklesia in the New Testament. Here the church is future, singular, universal in scope, founded upon revelation, and victorious over the gates of Hades.

III. The Second Occurrence of Ekklesia — Local in Practice

Scripture Reading: Matthew 18:15–17

[15] Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. [16] But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. [17] **And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church**. **But if he refuses even to hear the church**, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector.

This is the second occurrence of ekklesia. Here the church is present and functioning, identifiable and locatable, distinct from two or three, and capable of hearing and deciding under the King's authority.

The New Testament presents one assembly with two inseparable aspects: universal in life and local in expression. Matthew 16 reveals the church in God's purpose. Matthew 18 reveals the church in earthly practice.

IV. The Pneumatic Christ in Acts — The Formation of the Ekklesia in Locality

Christ Continues His Work as the Spirit

In Matthew, the Lord Jesus announces, "I will build My church" (Matt. 16:18). That declaration is not fulfilled in Matthew itself but awaits historical realization. The book of Acts records the fulfillment of this word. The same Christ who spoke in Matthew continues His work in Acts, not bodily, but pneumatically as the Spirit. Acts is therefore not a record of Christ's absence, but of His continued activity in another form.

Luke establishes this continuity at the opening of Acts when he writes, "The former account I made, O Theophilus, of all that Jesus began both to do and teach" (Acts 1:1). The implication is decisive. What Jesus began in the Gospels He continues in Acts. The Builder of the church has not changed, nor has His method. Christ Himself remains active.

This continuation takes place through the Spirit. Acts does not present the Spirit as acting independently of Christ, but as Christ Himself present and active in another form. Luke refers explicitly to "the Spirit of Jesus" directing the apostolic work (Acts 16:7). The Christ who announced the ekklesia in Matthew is the Christ who forms the ekklesia in Acts.

Before the term church becomes common, Luke describes the believers as those belonging to "the Way" (Acts 9:2; 19:9). The Way is not a separate movement from the ekklesia but its living content. The Way describes the life of Christ being lived and walked in; the ekklesia

describes the corporate assembly produced by that life. Those who walk in the Way are gathered into the ekklesia.

The First Local Church — The Church in Jerusalem

The first historical mention of a local church in Acts is the church in Jerusalem. On the day of Pentecost the believers were "all with one accord in one place" (Acts 2:1). After Peter announced Jesus as both Lord and Christ (Acts 2:36), "about three thousand souls were added" (Acts 2:41). The church appears immediately as a corporate entity.

Luke later refers to this body explicitly as "the church," writing, "So great fear came upon all the church" (Acts 5:11), and again, "a great persecution arose against the church which was at Jerusalem" (Acts 8:1). Although the number of believers was very large, Scripture records one church in Jerusalem. The first local church in Acts is singular in expression despite its great size.

This church is further confirmed as universal in life through the events recorded in Acts 10. When the Holy Spirit fell upon the Gentiles in the house of Cornelius, Peter testified, "God has shown me that I should not call any man common or unclean" (Acts 10:28), and the Spirit was poured out "on the Gentiles also" (Acts 10:45). These believers were not formed into a separate church, nor was a new local church established. Rather, Gentiles were added to the same ekklesia already existing in Jerusalem.

This first mention therefore establishes a governing pattern. The church is not divided by size, ethnicity, geography within a city, or function. Jerusalem contained multitudes of believers—first Jewish, then Gentile—yet the Spirit-inspired record recognizes one church in one city.

The Second Local Church — The Church in Antioch of Syria

The second historical local church recorded in Acts is the church in Antioch of Syria. Following the stoning of Stephen and the scattering of the believers, the gospel reached Antioch. Barnabas was sent there and later brought Saul from Tarsus to labor alongside him.

Luke records, "And it came to pass that for a whole year they assembled with the church and taught a great many people" (Acts 11:26). Later he again refers to "the church that was at Antioch" (Acts 13:1). Antioch, like Jerusalem, had multitudes of believers, yet Scripture again records one church in one locality.

The repetition is deliberate. The Spirit is establishing a pattern: wherever Christ is announced and received, the believers in that city are gathered into one church

The Churches of Galatia — One Church in Each City

From Antioch of Syria, Paul and Barnabas were sent out by the Spirit (Acts 13:2–4). As they traveled through Galatia, a province of the Roman Empire, local churches were formed in specific cities. Scripture speaks of the church in Antioch of Pisidia, the church in Iconium, the church in Lystra, and the church in Derbe.

After strengthening the believers in each city, Luke records, "So when they had appointed elders in every church, and prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed" (Acts 14:23). Each city had one church, and in each church elders—plural—were appointed. The plurality of elders preserved the oneness of the church in each locality.

When Paul and Barnabas completed their work in Galatia, they returned to Antioch of Syria. Luke records that "when they had come and gathered the church together, they reported all that God had done with them, and that He had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles" (Acts 14:27). Their report was made to the church corporately, not to an individual or hierarchy.

Summary of the Pattern in Acts

Acts presents a consistent and carefully delimited testimony. Christ, now acting as the Spirit—the Spirit of Jesus—forms the ekklesia wherever He is received and where believers walk in the Way. The church is universal in life and essence, yet always expressed locally.

The first local church recorded in Acts is the church in Jerusalem. The second is the church in Antioch of Syria. Both had multitudes of believers, yet each was expressed as one church in one city. Galatia likewise had churches, each city with one church and elders appointed in every church.

Though Paul would later undertake two additional journeys apart from Barnabas, and a final fourth journey to Rome resulting in his house arrest, no other local churches are named in Acts. Luke's record is selective and purposeful, establishing the governing pattern rather than providing an exhaustive catalog.

The Builder is Christ. The foundation is Christ. The ekklesia is formed by the pneumatic Christ and expressed locally according to God's design.

V. Paul's Unveiling of the Universal Body and the Local Churches — A Final Word

Paul Does Not Introduce the Church but Unveils Its Meaning

By the time Paul writes his epistles, the church already exists in history. It has been announced by Christ in Matthew and formed by Christ as the Spirit in Acts. Paul does not introduce the church, nor does he redefine it. He unveils what the church already is in God's eternal view.

Paul reveals that the church, the ekklesia, is the Body of Christ. "For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body" (1 Cor. 12:13). This Body is universal in life, essence, and fellowship. Yet Paul never presents this universal reality apart from the local churches. He writes "to the church of God which is at Corinth" (1 Cor. 1:2), and yet tells them, "you are the body of Christ, and members individually" (1 Cor. 12:27). The universal Body is therefore expressed practically and concretely in the local churches.

Paul Enhances the Church Without Dissolving Locality

Paul enhances the church in several profound ways without dissolving its practical expression. He reveals the church as the Body of Christ, emphasizing organic life and

headship (Eph. 1:22–23). He reveals it as the one new man, in which former distinctions are terminated in Christ (Eph. 2:15). He reveals it as the house of God, built together as God's dwelling place in the Spirit (Eph. 2:19–22). These are not separate entities or competing ideas, but complementary unveilings of the same church already seen functioning locally in Acts.

Paul further clarifies that the church is God's building and that it rests on a single foundation. "For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 3:11). The foundation is Christ Himself, announced through the apostles and prophets. "Having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone" (Eph. 2:20). The foundation consists of Christ revealed and confessed, not of personalities or lines of succession.

This revelation resolves the meaning of Christ's words, "upon this rock," in Matthew 16. The rock is the revelation and confession that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, and Christ Himself as the content of that confession. Peter was the first to utter this confession, but he was not its substance. Peter later confirms this when he speaks of believers as living stones being built together into a spiritual house, with Christ as the chief cornerstone (1 Pet. 2:4–6).

Locality as the Only New Testament Boundary

A careful reading of Paul's letters confirms the governing role of locality. In every epistle written to a church—not to an individual—Paul identifies the believers by locality at the outset: the church of God which is at Corinth, the churches of Galatia, the saints who are in Ephesus, the church of the Thessalonians. This consistent practice is not incidental. Locality is always in view.

According to the New Testament, the church can be distinguished only by locality, not by doctrine, emphasis, personality, or affiliation. Locality is the only God-ordained boundary that preserves the oneness of the universal church while allowing its practical expression on the earth.

The reader must therefore be clear on a critical point: in the New Testament there is no concept of churches in a city, nor of a church of a city as an institutional entity. Scripture speaks consistently of the church in a city. "Churches in a city" suggests multiple parallel assemblies differentiated by preference or practice. "Church of a city" suggests a civic or organizational institution. Both belong to later historical developments and are not categories found in the apostolic writings. The New Testament recognizes believers gathered simply as the church in a given locality, standing on one foundation and under one Head.

The Lord's Own Confirmation in Revelation

As a final confirmation, the New Testament closes with the Lord Jesus Himself addressing local churches by name and by locality. In Revelation 1–3, the ascended Christ dictates letters to the church in Ephesus, the church in Smyrna, the church in Pergamos, the church in Thyatira, the church in Sardis, the church in Philadelphia, and the church in Laodicea. These were real New Testament local churches existing in definite cities, composed of

believers gathered as the church in each locality under Christ's immediate headship. They must not be confused with the modern notion of "local churches" as used within Christianity, which often refers to denominational congregations or parallel assemblies within the same city. The churches addressed by the Lord in Revelation were singular in each locality and bore direct responsibility to Him as lampstands in their respective cities.

At the close of the book, Jesus confirms the scope of His speaking: "I, Jesus, have sent My angel to testify to you these things in the churches" (Rev. 22:16). The testimony of Jesus is thus preserved in the local churches, just as it was from Jerusalem to Antioch, from Galatia to Corinth.

Christ defines the church. Christ forms the church as the Spirit. Paul unveils the church's universal significance. The Lord confirms its local expression. One universal church, expressed in many local churches, each accountable to Christ in its own locality. This is the consistent testimony of the New Testament.